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AUTHOR Winsky, Mary A.
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ABSTRACT

Because of her interest in determining how to persuade other teachers to incorporate process-centered writing in their classrooms, the author applied for and received a teacher-as-researcher grant. Her research was conducted in New York City and nearby suburban schools. Although city schools tended to be shabbier and some teachers were not enthusiastic about changing their approaches to teaching writing, the response was primarily positive. She was especially impressed by the teacher trainer's sensitive, positive responses and to and toward the classroom teachers they observed and helped. However, in spite of the fact that suburban schools were staffed and attended by wealthier people, the prevailing attitude of the teachers toward understanding the writing process was not as receptive as that of their colleagues in the city. As district writing coordinator, the researcher decided to continue teaching junior high school writing class for credibility. Among the conclusions were that the approach to other teachers would have to be as delicate as the approach to students, that "ownership" of the classroom must remain with the teachers, and that regularity of support and follow-through is crucial. In addition, teacher training is a process, not a product. Perhaps most important, it is necessary to learn more about teacher training from teachers themselves. (DF)

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TEACHER TRAINING RESEARCH:

A PROCESS WRITING JOURNEY

by

Mary A. Winsky
Writing Coordinator, K - 12
Katonah-Lewisboro Schools
Katonah, New York 10536

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Bad students used to go stand in corners. Good teachers still do. They're pouting, I think, because no one really listens to them. No one asks them what they need, how they learn and grow.

But now we have a small cadre of expert listeners in American Education. They're process writing teachers who've learned how to listen carefully to children's stories. The very fact of their listening so intently to kids has revitalized writing all across the country. By taking their cues from kids, they've learned to "lead from behind," and kids have moved forward - with joy and commitment - into better writing, self-esteem and peer interactions.

Now there's an incredible phenomenon occurring. Those same active listeners of children are beginning to listen to teachers. They're moving quietly into schools in the name of writing process in order to train teachers. But instead of telling teachers how to teach, they're listening to them, conferring about their process, learning their needs, leading again "from behind."

What a contrast to the traditional road show that we buy to revitalize teachers! With a cast of slick experts and quick-fix, one-day workshops, those old smoothies sail through like Elmer Gantry as if performance is enough. If they leave their exhausted audiences with any message at all, it is that star performances mean star teachers.

For nearly seventeen years I'd been giving performances in my suburban classroom. But three years ago my classroom had been transformed by writing process, and kids' writing had taken over. I tried at meetings to tell my junior high English department how wonderful it was, but they wouldn't listen. I opened my door, but

they wouldn't come in. So I asked to step out - into their classrooms.

To my delight and amazement, they said yes.

In I came to a different seventh, eighth or ninth grade each day with a box of black and white journals and a message about process. We moved from prewriting through drafting to revision, and the students thrived. As I entered kids would cheer, then clamor to read what I'd written back to them, then write on. After ten weeks I moved on to four new sections of four different teachers.

Again student response was overwhelming. Starved to write and know, we wrote together toward meaning. But I was beginning to fear my meaning was just for the kids, not the teachers. I'd already been reaching kids; I'd hoped my new audience was teachers. After twenty weeks, what was my legacy for them? I interviewed the teachers whose classes I'd worked to find out.

I found most resented my "performance."

"What you did was just fantastic, Mary," said one man.

"That's the trouble," said another. "You're too tough an act to follow."

An "act"? My teaching of writing was not an act. It was the major flow of my life. Where had I gone wrong? In almost every classroom.

I had taken over center stage. True, the teachers remained in the classrooms, and all but two participated fully with students in all the writing activities. But what was the carry over? After I left the spotlight, very little.

Three teachers said they used my lessons almost without change, then stopped when they ran out of modeled lessons. Two teachers said nothing. One teacher tried using my anecdotes, stories, mini-lessons just once, then realized they weren't "her". So she kept the process but changed the content. Ah! One man wished he had time to do what I did, but he didn't. Even before I'd left, he'd been using the first five, then ten minutes each time I came to dictate spelling or vocabulary lists, because this class was getting "behind". One man said categorically, "I'm not you. I can't do that stuff."

"Stuff"? It's not "stuff". It's writing process, the biggest language arts movement in American education. Writing process believes that each child has a story to tell and deserves time, ownership and response to tell it. Didn't they know that? No. And I'd bungled my attempt to teach them. I'd taken over their classrooms, stepped on their toes and left them flat-footed about what to do and where to go next. Where they went was back into their old corners.

"How do you change teachers then?" I asked in frustration.

Lucy Calkins of Columbia's Writing Project invited me to find out for myself through a Teacher-as-Researcher grant from the Gould Foundation.

So I came out of my corner again - this time past my colleagues, my building, my district - into research.

"Throw your research out onto the cutting edge of your interest," advised Lucy. I threw it into teacher training, and it landed first in Brooklyn, Harlem, and Queens.

So on February vacation, as my colleagues flew off to the Bahamas and sunshine, I drove into New York City to begin researching teacher trainers of process writing.

I learned to follow and listen closely, to focus on the words and body language of the trainers. As I focused on the trainer, I watched her focus on the teacher. I watched one beautiful, brown-eyed trainer sit beside a teacher at a conference room table and rock forward on her elbows with listening readiness. I watched the teacher whom she leaned to help pull back and get quiet. I saw the lovely, soft trainer try again, and the teacher pull away again. I listened to suggestions and excuses, more helpful suggestions and more defensive excuses. I heard what the trainer said and loved it. I heard what the teacher answered and became afraid. This was no easy job. I listened harder.

In the second grade classroom we went to next, the teacher had a big smile and a class at work on process. Gently the trainer eased down beside the teacher and a group of students clustered on a small area rug behind a divider bookcase. "How's this topic list working?" she asked.

"Well, I didn't think it was, so I wanted to look at it today, while you are here. And, you know, I think it's okay."

"How did they come up with topics?" asked the trainer.

"We brainstormed them, and I typed it up. But so far they just seem to want to read their topic off the list!"

"Uh huh." No quick solution. Just attentive listening.

She was moving away to another group, then another. The teacher followed. I saw the quick conference techniques of writing process

working as she moved around raising questions, rather than providing answers. Instead, the teacher seemed to be solving her own problems through collaboration. This was why it worked. The teacher retained ownership of her own classroom.

Only once did the trainer take over to model for the teacher. It was during group share.

"Excuse me," she said with a smile after the first child had shared. "Could we try something a little different this time?" I heard her language, her being switch into teacher mode as she addressed the second graders, rather than their teacher. Quickly and simply she suggested the next child read her story all the way through, without showing the pictures, and then show the illustrations. Group share proceeded toward celebration with a new phenomena. After reading and taking questions, the child turned her book toward the audience, and the audience said back the story without the author. The author beamed at the remembered words, and participation was total. Student and teacher shone with the rewards of this brief but transforming intervention. With one well-timed suggestion, the trainer provided a possibile variation for all future group shares.

"Your training is so smooth and unobtrusive!" I commented as we moved out into the hall toward the teachers' room.

But just then we were intruded upon by the negative harangue of a fifth grade teacher who was balking at wasting her precious test-preparation time with the frivolity of process. Fifth graders must pass a state-mandated writing test and, therefore, have no time to write. Instead skills must be mastered in isolation. The

gentle-voiced trainer received the staccato barrage resignedly, then patiently made suggestions each time the teacher stopped to reload. When the teacher's "break" time was over, the teacher seemed to have "won." But the loss for her students hung heavy.

In the barren teachers' room we entered, a worn-out teacher sat smoking in the corner, feet propped up, staring. The heaviness prevailed. It was the first time someone had thrown in the towel like that in a frontal attack; yet the trainer managed to be philosophical. An insecure teacher like that might never quiet down enough to hear kids instead of bureaucracy. She responded more to perceived administrative pressure than to the stories within her students. Since she couldn't listen to her kids, she couldn't hear the trainer. She had to let her go. But she'd return, after the standardized test, "just for fun" with a poetry unit. She'd give the teacher more listening time then and hope to learn what she needed.

By now two comfortable teachers were putting on hot water and unwrapping fruit and cheese. I pulled out a peanut butter sandwich while the trainer broke into her crackers and another teacher popped open a yogurt. Their talk never stopped, and it was all writing process centered.

"So how did your folder-looking go?" asked the trainer with swiveling neck as a teacher busied herself with the boiling water and instant coffee.

"Great. I mean, what did you think?"

"I thought Tahisha was fascinating. Look at this and this." The trainer thumbed through a student folder while the teacher beamed wider and wider.

"That's the girl I was telling you about," one teacher bubbled to the other, "the one who. . . ." And the sharing continued.

I thought of my teachers' room back at school with its negative talk and non-academic trivia. Our people talked about recipes, and sport scores, and bad behavior. And here I was in N.Y.C. having the best school-time lunch of my year. The coffee was bitter, the room bleak, the neighborhood blighted. Yet here a teacher trainer in writing was helping and listening seriously to these underpaid teachers and bringing them community. Was she just special, or was I seeing something truly exciting that could break down the negative isolation of American teachers? I always think too big too soon, so I promised objectivity and moved to another school on another day.

After two hours of driving and two traffic jams, I met another lovely writing trainer. We greeted each other warmly then opened an upstairs door on a third grade teacher. Brassy haired and voiced, this teacher seemed no more sensitive to kids than the drop-out at the other school. Dead-panned and mildly condescending, she told the class that the trainer was there to do "that other kind of writing" they "had" to do. She drilled the inattentive class rigidly in process steps, interrupted the entire class every time the slightest disturbance arose and couldn't be bothered taking down the writing folders from their too-high isolation above the coats.

Amid this chaos moved the graceful trainer. She covered the children's hands with hers, looked into their eyes from below as she crouched with interest by their desks and told them quietly to go on, to write, that she was listening, that they were important. With such

nurturing, perhaps some day the students can cue the teacher by their learning needs.

"How do you do it?" I grumped as I moved behind her skillful presence when time was up, and we walked up worn brown metal steps directly to another classroom.

"She does have an attitude problem," understated the trainer. "With her I hope example is enough, since so little dialogue is possible."

On another N. Y. C. day a trainer and I opened a door upon radiance. The beaming round face of the teacher turned expectantly toward us. Third graders sat eagerly in horseshoe shaped order, their writing folders open before them.

"Just in time!" gushed the enthusiastic teacher. "We were waiting for you. Weren't we class?"

"Yes!" chorused this ideal group - and on went process. When things were running smoothly, a substitute, sent along with the trainer, took over, and trainer and teacher slipped out to a nearby empty auditorium to talk.

The teacher had a pad full of notes from a recent third grade meeting on writing process, and she needed a knowledgeable person to listen and translate them. Without translation, the jottings would never have become reality in her classroom. She needed a trainer to interpret, encourage and focus her.

How many times I'd needed the same! Yet I had never met a teacher trainer before this week, let alone seen one at work even though I'd been in public education since 1965. When was I "trained"? I couldn't remember a single time help had come to me. I had sought

training outside in workshops, courses, summer sessions. But here trainers were in classrooms, training teachers while they taught kids. The immediacy of feedback and ongoing listening support had enormous impact. Such vital interaction pushed theory effectively and permanently into practice. It seemed.

But was this a phenomenon of inner cities only? The trainers here were so beautiful. Perhaps they had to be to contrast the neighborhoods, the buildings, the dragged-down teachers. They came in with lightness and a message: every child, every teacher had a story to tell through process writing, and they were there to listen. Sure enough, teachers and students were telling their stories, and the telling was not only improving their writing but beginning to transform them too. New York City was being pastelled into an important learning process.

If it was working this well in the city, how much better must it be working in the affluent suburbs. There they needed no brightening of walls or windows or teachers. Perhaps teacher training was purer there. Besides, my four hour round trips couldn't continue once vacation was over. Thus began my suburban search for contrasting Camelots to the city schools I'd visited.

My first discovery was that there are no teacher "trainers" in the suburbs! There are resource teachers in writing, helping teachers in writing, writing supervisors, writing coordinators, writing specialists. These people are drawn right out of local faculties, so a training concept might offend colleagues.

Indeed the marked difference in appearance, manner and speech that was obvious in New York City between trainers and faculty did not exist in the sprawling brick elementary schools I visited. In the windowed corridors where expensive materials lushed down bulletin boards and into the wardrobes of teachers and students, everyone knew each other and smiled a lot.

In one school a tanned, smiling teacher in a soft teal blue sweater expressed eagerness that the writing resource teacher would come to her that day. No wonder. She came, the teacher moved to her desk in back to correct workbooks, and the resource teacher performed up front. From the last resource teacher in writing she had inherited this "dancing on the table" syndrome. I cringed in recognition of my own fall "performance."

And lunch was disappointing. Small talk replaced the teacher training listening I'd seen in this time slot in N.Y.C. They were either too polite or too good friends to "talk shop" at lunch.

Was this what the suburbs were like? Were we spoiled by specials and too sophisticated to give and take help at lunch? Were we "trainable"? I was beginning to worry that the need to improve writing instruction may be harder to see amid piles of shiny textbooks, stacks of freshly unpacked workbooks, banks of beige computers. The brilliance of these materials may dim the softer hues of process. Could it be that when dynamic, smartly dressed writing specialists, supervisors, resource teachers, consultants, coordinators sweep into classrooms with a message about process, most teachers retreat to correct workbooks in the back while the performance goes on? When the performance is over, do traditional dittos reappear to

be filled in once more? Could filling in blanks still be more important than filling out lives?

I tried to find out in a district where the writing coordinator had created her own position and not inherited anything. This woman does not perform before classes. She works with teachers in the mode of the city trainers. She interacts smoothly, and training is well-modeled in classrooms where teachers feel empowered.

And real training also takes place over lunch. She considers the teachers' room her "office" and as such conducts business there. When we entered, bought cokes and sat down at a round formica table, we were joined immediately by a tall, slim kindergarten teacher with a headache who began unwrapping an elaborately healthy lunch. When she discovered I was a writing person, she shot up and back to her room for a box of student writing samples. She plunked them down before me and invited our approval. We approved. When the writing coordinator left for the ladies room, I asked her how her students' writing had changed since process.

"Oh, I don't use process!" she announced . "She doesn't come into my room at all."

"Why not?" I asked the coordinator later.

"She doesn't want me there," she said simply. "She has a system that works for her that she wouldn't dream of changing. So my training for her is as audience. I listen and comment positively on everything she brings me. She's moving much closer to process."

Is there such a category as teachers' room training? That's where this teacher is being trained through active listening.

Active listening occurred right in the classroom in the next suburb. The morning I was there I watched the helping teacher in writing come in, smiling and gentle, and settle off to the side in the back of a third grade classroom. She had taken home writing folders and had them ready for the teacher.

"They were wonderful!" she assured the now-proud teacher, pressing her hand and looking into her eager eyes.

She reminded the teacher of the mini lesson she'd modeled for her the week before and suggested a way for the teacher to proceed this week.

"I thought you'd do it," the teacher confessed sheepishly.

"No, you're ready. Try it."

Thus empowered, the teacher turned optimistically toward her third graders. As the teacher proceeded through the mini-lesson, the helping teacher sat recording student responses. What a gift! That day, instead of lugging home just papers to correct, this teacher would carry positive feedback from her kids and trainer. Now there is an immediate reward for fine teaching!

In the last suburban district I visited, I found myself reading aloud and writing a poem about my father with one of the writing coordinator's reading groups, and conferring with students in process the rest of the day. Everyone else had treated me as an observer and let me snoop around with my clipboard. This comfortable woman pulled me right into teacher training. Yet our continuum of sharing was so subtle, I felt gentled and refreshed. But when she took out her favorite books on writing for me at the end of the day, I also felt enriched. She has read and studied broadly. All the trainers must

have. Yet she shared her books with such generosity, I went home enlightened - and ready to read.

I was finished. I'd seen city and suburbs. Contrasts were apparent, but the theme of listening to teacher needs was paramount. Will I be a good listener when I become my district's writing coordinator this year?

What did I know? That teacher learning styles are as varied as student learning styles; that I will individualize as much as a trainer as I did as a teacher. That I will keep my own junior high writing class for credibility. That the way I talk to teachers will be as delicate as the way I talk to kids. That I will speak with gentle authority. That some teachers won't want to listen. That ownership of the classroom must remain with the teachers, so that they in turn can put ownership of writing process in the hands of their students. That I can't show them "what to do"; that we can only share and discover together. That regularity of support and follow-through is crucial. That positive classroom feedback nurtures and renews. That teacher training is a process not a product as surely as writing and learning are. That I still have a lot to read and learn. That a trainer needs to be there on the spot for crisis intervention as well as follow-through and continuing support. That doing, practicing by the teacher requires coaching by the trainer. And good coaches never take over.

Good listeners don't either. They never take ownership of writing classrooms from the teachers they train. Teachers need to feel good, in charge, empowered. That's why my first semester

take-over from my colleagues felt so awful. If one learns to write by writing, just as surely one learns to teach writing by teaching. Good process writing teachers have already empowered their students with ownership over their writing. To ask them to give up their teaching to a trainer would be beyond endurance. But ownership in isolation gets very lonely.

The on-going response of a trainer overcomes that loneliness. I saw colleagial sharing become so constructive in teacher training, more constructive than anything I'd seen or heard in twenty years of isolation. Its non-evaluative tone was refreshingly free of the paranoia administrators sometimes cause or jealousy of a singled-out colleague. That a trainer can be there as instructor, model and observer seems ideal in our otherwise lonely profession.

But I do worry about the loneliness of the suburban trainers! Since visiting these hard-working people, I have felt a reaching-out that shows their need for a network as well. One came on a writing weekend with me. One took our writing institute at the end of June. One called for dinner with another trainer I haven't met yet. They too need someone to listen.

The city trainers, on the other hand, already have a nuturing audience. I realize their excellence is sustained by the Thursday training sessions Columbia runs - for them! Every Thursday they are trained as a group by Lucy Calkins from eight to four. If we are to believe teachers are best trained in a system of continuing support, then of course the trainers need the same. This, more than city or suburb, was the one enormous variable among those I observed. New

York City has a knowledgeable forum in which to air problems and work out solutions. The suburbs are on their own to deal with crises. While they must clearly learn and meet the needs of writers and teachers, their own needs now get put on hold until they can find a weekend or course or friend. And even when found, those weekends, courses, friends probably know only about writing process, not teacher training.

We need to learn more about teacher training. And we need to learn it from teachers. We need to find out how they work out their own answers to their own questions, how they trust their own insights, how they really see writing, how they recognize moments of transition in their own teaching story.

Listening to teachers will now teach us as much about teacher training, I believe, as listening to kids did about writing process. And teaching will be revitalized by it as surely as writing was. What I learned about teacher training in five months is as big as what I'd learned about writing process in three years. Just as I had based my writing classroom on listening, I now see clearly that that's what teacher training must be based on. Listening and respect.

When we began listening with respect to the stories of kids in writing classrooms, they came out of their corners. If we begin listening now to teachers on a regular basis, with on-going support, they will come out too. Once freed from isolated corners, they will tell the stories we need to hear next: the stories of teachers of writing.

When we hear together the meaning those stories create, we will be leading again - from behind.